

A Voice of Truth

Clyde Wilson

Power and History: The Political Thought of James Burnham, by Samuel T. Francis, *Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984. 141 pp. \$19.50 (paper \$8.50).*

WITHOUT PRESUMING to provide a definitive list of the elements that make up that phenomenon or tendency known in the second half of the twentieth century as conservatism, one can state with certainty one that is essential — a realistic concept of the limitations of human nature and human potential, based upon both history and practical experience. No American political thinker of our era has better exemplified this stern and hallowed dictum than James Burnham. It was, as Dr. Samuel T. Francis shows, one of the unifying themes of Burnham's various books and of his *National Review* column (1955-1978).

Francis's respectful examination of Burnham's thought is an exemplary piece of intellectual history in its succinctness and precision and in the insight with which it discerns and portrays recurrent and characteristic themes. Burnham's writings were all to some degree entangled in the issues and events of their own day. By looking at them systematically and in retrospect, as a completed corpus, Francis has given Burnham's thought a consistency and a depth that do not self-evidently emerge from particular works.

By this analysis Burnham's realism has its roots in a Western tradition going back to antiquity and usually associated with the great Renaissance realist Machiavelli. In Burnham's case the influence was refined through the medium of the two modern social thinkers who figured in his 1943 book, *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom* — Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca. Machiavelli's sincere republicanism did not prevent him from looking candidly, some would say cynically, at men and motives. In fact, one might argue, only through such toughness of mind could the hope of republicanism be kept alive. By the same token, Burnham's very allegiance to Western liberty forced him to look realistically at its weaknesses and saved him from that easy and sentimental faith in the certainty of its endurance that characterized his time. His apprehension of the vulnerability of the West could only have been reinforced by his personal experience before 1940 inside the communist beast and his intimate acquaintance with the merciless efficiency of Marxist dialectics. In the final analysis, few Americans were better equipped to look this frightful century unflinchingly in the face.

Burnham thus had a unique immunity to the two most characteristic failings of his countrymen — sentimentality and superficiality. Pareto and Mosca, as well as Marx, taught Burnham that the study of

politics is the study of elites and that elites must be understood in a functional rather than an ideological sense. While the attention of the fashionable opinion leaders was focused on emergent liberalism as a set of enlightened policies, appropriate to the day, Burnham almost alone was asking what the liberal worldview and its characteristic purveyors portended for the West in a functional sense. Using Pareto's concept of the circulation of elites between lions and foxes, he was able to describe the changes taking place in American society in a deep historical perspective. *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), though wrong in many details and not quite emancipated from Marxist vocabulary, did make the essential point that the nature of leadership — the attitudes and characteristics of the elite and therefore its capacity to meet crisis, internal or external — was changing. This was bound to lead to a change in the Western position in the world. At the end of this chain of analysis was a natural conclusion in *Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism* (1964). Functionally — stripped of its subjectivities and sentimentalities — liberalism was the ruling foxes' ideological rationalization for dallying with grave threats to domestic tranquility and the common defense.

In between *The Managerial Revolution* and *Suicide of the West* were works that filled out descriptive aspects of the revolution, like *Congress and the American Tradition* (1959), or works that illuminated how the new elite was facing and should face its greatest challenge: *The Struggle for the World* (1947), *Containment or Liberation?* (1952), *The Web of Subversion* (1954), *The War We Are In* (1967). In these books and by his fortnightly exposure in *National Review*, Burnham not only positioned himself as a major figure in the conservative alternative; he also added a new dimension to that alternative. While approving the free market and tradition, Burnham always stressed the gravity of the present threat to Western liberty and therefore the insufficiency of pleasant and traditional nostrums. In other words, he

continued to remind a rather gentle folk of the hardness of historical choice. His distaste for the managerial elite, that is, the regime of liberalism, never led him into nostalgia for its predecessor, the entrepreneurial elite. It was the inadequacy of their predecessors that had left the field to the liberals. One could not look back. One could only look forward, bleak as that prospect might be.

Perhaps the one unsatisfying aspect of this study is its lack of a comparative perspective. In order to appreciate fully the stature of Burnham's achievement, we need to compare his thought with that of the men who passed for the best thinkers of the West at the same time. This comparative perspective would perhaps have taken the study beyond the author's purposes, and there is a virtue in Francis's narrow, unwavering focus on his subject. However, Burnham would have appeared at his best by contrast with his pretentious contemporaries. The concept of the "managerial revolution" stands tall in comparison with the naive faith in democratic technocracy that formed the public gospel of 1941. (This faith in utopia to be brought by a combination of mass sentiment and manipulation by a technical elite remains to this day the central tenet and lowest common denominator of the liberal mentality. Part of Burnham's virtue was to discern that this was no more nor less than the rationalization of the substitution of oligarchy for a republic of self-governing citizens.) And Burnham's assessment of the Red menace, again, looks best in comparison with the fetish for cultivation of "world opinion" that largely governed at the same time.

One could make a long list of pompous nincompoops who flourished in the last three or four decades, who were awarded with media adulation, office, and money for no greater achievement than mouthing the superficial analyses of the day. In any state one prospers by serving the ruler. In a democracy one flatters the people (or the media, which usurp the voice of the people). But democracy can only survive if it can continue to turn out

from time to time men willing to tell what is true rather than what is flattering or comforting. Burnham is one of such in a time in which they have never been rarer.

One finds in his stern and solitary figure only one missing element — another of those elements which, along with realism, constitutes an indispensable element of conservatism. That is an awareness of a divine presence in the universe. His later writings give an intellectual obeisance to this awareness, but nowhere does it shine through with a spiritual conviction. Not himself, perhaps, completely attuned to the spiritual essence of Western civilization, he was still able to think as realistically and honestly as any man about the necessary conditions for its preservation.

Much of the writing by conservatives about conservative thinkers falls into one of two types. Either it is excessively

(though understandably) adulatory, or it constitutes an exercise in exclusion: the promotion of one style of conservatism over its competitors, the competitors to be read out of the faith. To both these approaches Francis has supplied an alternative worthy of imitation. While he clearly admires Burnham, he has examined his ideas with the same hard, classical detachment with which Burnham has examined the world, and in a prose as austere and lucid as that of his subject. The result is a model analysis: a serious mind pondering and assessing a serious mind. As such, this book constitutes a benchmark on the path to maturity of conservative scholarship. We can only hope that it will inspire similar succinct and hard-hitting studies of other giants among our fathers — Weaver, Kendall, Meyer, Kirk, Stanton Evans, Molnar, and others.

Hilaire Belloc: Old Thunder

Frederick D. Wilhelmsen

"Gigantes autem erant super terram in diebus illis."
— Genesis, VI, v. 4

Hilaire Belloc, by A. N. Wilson, *New York: Atheneum, 1984. x + 398 pp. \$17.95.*

A. N. WILSON WALKS AROUND his subject, Hilaire Belloc, marvelling before a gargantuan figure whose proportions simply are too vast to be circumscribed within the cloth of conventional critical biography. The tailor does his best — and a very good best it is. Wilson confesses, "if I created a character in a novel as Hilaire Belloc, people would not believe it." The more Wilson, an accomplished novelist and biographer, studied H. B., the "more complex" he became: the lyrical poet who never read any contemporary poetry; the rhymester whose high jinks still charm little ones whose parents have long since forgotten Belloc if they ever knew him at all; the artilleryman on bivouac at Toul who smelled the Revolution as "France went by" and the aging monarchist who savoured the charge of Charles I at Naseby; the most versatile and certainly the finest English prose stylist in this and possibly in any century who grumbled at having to write for a living; the sailor who wrote from the liberty of his battered old boat, the *Nona*, "dear reader, read less and sail more" even as he lusted for bigger and better paying audiences; the perpetual wanderer tramping Europe, burning for adventure even as he sang the praises of a rooted peasantry and a hearth

steeped in seasonable traditions that "halted the cruelty of time"; the enemy of the rich and of capitalist greed who once asked for a bucket of money as a birthday gift; the drummer boy for a Roman Catholicism he helped make proud of itself, triumphant, who refused to pick up the medal conferred on him by the man he confessed to be the Vicar of Christ.

Although he could have exploited better the theme to his own advantage, Wilson fingers the importance of *The Four Men* in understanding Belloc. Settled in Sussex, that brooding, often melancholy, sometimes funny book is suffused with the sadness of the autumnal Days of the Dead and it is haunted by a conquered but only barely conquered skepticism about all things ultimate and the destiny of the soul: Myself is Sailor, Poet, and Grizzlebeard, and the three of them are the one Hilaire Belloc.

Wilson takes Belloc from birth in 1870 to death in 1953. Sketched sometimes rapidly, and sometimes with great detail, are Belloc's education, his tour of duty in the French Artillery, his marriage with all the vicissitudes of his engagement, his two forays into parliament, his subsequent disgust with the Party System, his early essays at being writer and journalist, the war years and his often inaccurate articles about the Western Front, and then his settling into a very long middle age as a literary man who made his living ham-